

Dark Horizons



*'Highly recommended for
those interested in traditional
supernatural fiction.'*

Ellen Datlow

*Dark Horizons 43
Spring/Summer 2003
edited by Debbie Bennett*

Dark Horizons

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Dark Horizons

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Editorial

Debbie Bennett

Well, we must be doing something right! No less than 8 stories from *Dark Horizons* got an honorary mention in Ellen Datlow's *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* anthology for 2001. The authors and stories are: PK Grave: *Winter Feed*, Christopher Harman: *Laughing Matter*, Paul Lewis: *In Her Eyes* and *One Last Wish*, Chris Longmuir: *The Ghost Train*, Loren MacLeod: *Children of Fortune*, John Travis: *Cuticles* and Geoffrey Warburton: *Dunn' s Pictures*.

Many thanks to Ellen Datlow for her compliments (see cover quote) and for rating *Dark Horizons* as 'a wonderful bonus for members of the British Fantasy Society'. And congratulations to the authors too. Not to mention our artists, some of whom were nominated for British Fantasy Awards last year.

Steve Lines' wonderful cover is the first I've been able to produce in colour. Pretty impressive, isn't it? Thanks also to the rest of our artists and authors for their valuable contributions. But quality stories are getting thin on the ground.

Has everyone stopped writing for the small press? I know we don't pay, but we are a stepping stone up to the ones who do!

If you want to see more of the BFS, come along to our annual event *FantasyCon*. We're in Stafford this year, from 21st-23rd November at the Tillington Hall Hotel. You'll be able to meet authors, editors and agents in an informal situation, take part in panels and discussions and meet friends both old and new. Don't worry if you're on your own – a lot of us started out that way and we are a friendly bunch really. Full details on our web site or email me below.

Hope you enjoy these stories and art.

Debbie

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Dies Irae

Paul Garside

I wait.

Sometimes it seems I've spent my whole life waiting. It's as if I've just been biding time until something important happens. What, though, I don't know.

I watch and I wait.

I've never really felt as if I belong, I suppose. I've tried to fit in, tried to be like everyone else, but I know I've just been pretending. I've never had a job or a place to live that has lasted more than a few months. I have no real friends. My love life, if it can be considered as such, has consisted of no more than casual and awkward encounters.

I work when I can find work; I spend my evenings in the noisy anonymity of pubs and bars, trying to believe that I have a life.

Sometimes I just sit and watch people as they talk, as they enjoy themselves. I watched a woman last night as she stood by the bar, chatting to her friends, joking and laughing. It was so natural for her. I have never been – *could never be* – that relaxed in the company of others. She had no worries, no nagging sense of difference; she did not fear people as I do. It seemed so unfair.

I nurture my hatred.

It's all to do with memory, I suppose; memory and fear.

I'm sure I was happy, once. I try to remember – I know if I could, it would all make sense, somehow. But the further back I go, the more my memories seem to have a bright and glassy fragility, as if they might shatter under too close scrutiny. That is my greatest fear: that the little certainty I do have is nothing more than a figment, and might break apart at any moment.

I know there must be more than this. *There must.* Every so often I find something that *almost* awakens memories, *almost* provokes an understanding; and yet somehow the revelation always eludes me. It can be anything – the lines of a building, a voice on the radio, rainbow patterns in an oil-slicked puddle, the texture of wood beneath my fingers, the aroma of incense – and I am always left with a profound sense of unease. I don't know why I find myself subject to these strange obsessions; perhaps they are why I still believe the world should make sense, in spite of everything.

They dragged me down from my far heaven. They violated me; they abused me.

They told me to break their enemies, and I did so; I gave them the wealth and the power that they demanded of me; I debased myself to fulfil their every whim.

I was sitting in the corner of the pub when the man came in. I'm not really sure why I noticed him to start with – he wasn't particularly remarkable, after all: just another wealthy, middle-aged businessman. I watched him shake the water from his umbrella and pick his way across to the bar. There was nothing unusual about him at all.

What was it then that held my attention? I didn't know. I wondered if I recognised him from somewhere, but I could not imagine that our paths had ever crossed before, and I certainly did not know his name. Perhaps it was the nervous – almost fearful – glance he cast back towards the door that intrigued me. Or maybe it was the sense of something stirring beneath the surface of memory.

I can't explain why I chose to follow him when he left.

When they had done with me – when I had done their will – they broke my wings, castrated me and cast me out into the world.

The man walked back towards the heart of the city and I followed him, keeping a dozen or so yards behind him but making no real effort to conceal myself. The wind and the driving rain served to hide me well enough.

After perhaps fifteen minutes – and just as I was beginning to question my sanity; just as I was about to abandon this stupid, futile pursuit – he turned off of the busy street and began to pick his way through a maze of alleys and side roads. I could tell from the odour on the wind that we were nearing the river.

Driven by that same impetus – part curiosity and part obsession – I continued to follow him, though now some vague instinct prompted me to greater caution. I fell back and kept to the shadows.

And then, as I looked down to step over a foul smelling rivulet, I lost him. I hurried to the spot where I last seen him and looked around. After a moment's inexplicable alarm – *why should I be so fascinated by this man, after all?* – I noticed the small door into one of the warehouses. It hung slightly ajar. I slipped through, into the darkness of the interior.

I have nurtured my hatred. I have watched my tormentors for all of these years. I live for the moment of my vengeance.

But I am patient. I wait.

I stumbled over something almost as soon as I had entered, and as my eyes grew used to the darkness I could see that the place was filled with the hulks of rusting machinery. There was a smell of neglect, too – I could easily believe it had been abandoned for decades. As I picked my way forwards through the darkness I realised that I could see a faint glow near the centre of the warehouse, almost concealed by the haphazard stacks of detritus. I could hear voices, too, echoing

between the dead apparatus. They were too faint for me to work out what was being said, but there was something in the tones used, perhaps, or maybe just the voices themselves, that once more stirred up the ghost of a memory.

I found myself torn between this new and alien curiosity, and a growing sense of fear. Though it seemed to be almost against my will to do so, I allowed the obsession to win. I crept warily forwards.

Finally, after interminable minutes, I came to the centre of the warehouse. Whereas the rest of the place was ramshackle and cluttered, here the floor had been cleared to leave an open area perhaps six yards across. A desultory light came from the few small lamps arrayed at the edges of the area. At the far side I could see five men, all well dressed, all in their middle years. Four of them, the man I had followed included, stood talking and pointing, watching a fifth. It took me a few moments to work out what this last man was doing, and then I realised: He was painting a design of some sort on the concrete floor; a circle taking up almost all of the area and now all but complete. The edge of it ran within a few inches of my hiding place.

Then the man straightened, the circle complete. As I huddled there in the shadows, the others began to move. With a jolt of fear I saw that one was coming directly towards me. But he stopped, a few yards to my left, and simply stood there, facing towards the centre of the circle. My puzzlement grew. The others took up positions around the circle, too. One of them, across from me, stepped forwards. From the way the other watched him with a kind of deference, I took him to be their leader. He began to add something to the design, working in slow, deliberate motions, murmuring something beneath his breath as he did so.

From nowhere came a sudden fragment of memory. *I have been here before.* On the heels of the memory rolled a choking sense of panic. I wanted to run, to escape the place, but it was too late by then. I could do nothing without been seen, and I feared these men, I realised, with a profound and inexplicable dread. I was trapped and there was nothing I could do.

They are rich men, now, powerful men; but they are greedy, too. They are not satisfied with what they have. They seek to repeat what they did all those years ago. They wish to prostitute me once more.

Whatever vague notions of terror I entertained, they remained unrealised. The moment passed and the men returned to the far side of the circle once more.

I became convinced that nothing more would happen. The men sat across from me, occasionally talking to each other in low voices, sometimes pacing to and fro, but nothing more. I began to consider how I could escape from the place, wondering if I could sneak back though the gloom unnoticed.

Then a distant bell marked the passing of an hour. As if in response, they moved to various points of the design again; there were a few moments of activity as they added lines and symbols to the growing figure, and there were murmured words I could not fully hear. Then there was silence as they settled to waiting

once more.

Perhaps half an hour passed. My fear had settled to a constant dull dread. My limbs were stiffening to muted agony but I did not dare move – I was certain they would see me.

Then, for the first time since I arrived, they spoke in normal tones, in words I could understand:

‘It won’t work, will it?’ one of them said. ‘He won’t come.’

‘It, Michael. It, not he,’ replied another, their leader. ‘It’s nothing more than a tool, remember that.’

‘Whatever. It still won’t work, though, will it?’

‘Be patient. We’re not finished yet. Do you remember nothing of the last time?’

And after that there was silence again. We all waited.

In the silence I tried to flex my limbs as best I could, but I could do little to relieve the cramp that slowly burnt into them. Desperate to find something to draw my thoughts from my discomfort, I studied the pattern they had drawn, or at least that part of it that ran close to my hiding place. Whatever it was they had used, to mark out the thing, it glimmered a greasy red in the half-light. Not quite sure why I did so, I reached out and touched the line. It smeared surprisingly easily – the stuff was still almost liquid. When I pulled my hand away, it stuck to my fingers, oily and unpleasant; a hint of decay reached my nostrils, the suggestion of something old and rancid. I shuddered despite myself and tried to wipe it off, rubbing my hand against the rough concrete, but in my haste I ended up smearing the pattern even more. Disgusted, I pulled back further into the shadows and tried to ignore the stench which now seemed to hang about me.

They used me and broke me and bound me. Now they wish to use me again as they did before.

But they bound me as a man, and as a man I am no longer fully constrained by their magics. They bound me as a man, and thus I can be as duplicitous as they.

That is all in the past now. I followed them here; I watched them perform this unnervingly familiar ceremony; now I wait. I am caught up in the moment just as they are. I am infected by the same sense of momentous anticipation.

I no longer question my presence here, or wonder why I had chosen to follow them. It is no longer relevant.

I hear the distant chimes of the bell again – midnight. The leader paces around the circle once more; at certain points he stops and adds further lines to the design. He walks right past my hiding place. If I were to reach out, I could touch his immaculately polished shoe. He walks on. I watch him with a growing sense of expectation. He draws the final line, speaks the final word, steps back, waits.

I look down at the pattern before me, at the scuffed and smeared line. A thought rises from some unknown depth, from somewhere that is scarcely a part



of me at all – *the circle is incomplete.*

And then – *then* – the memories return, the glorious, iridescent memories.
Now I understand; *now* everything makes sense. I cannot contain my laughter.

'Who's there?' one of them calls, a note of panic in his voice.

I rise from the shadows.

I rise from the shadows.

The form in which I have been bound for all these years falls away.

In their arrogance, in their ignorance, they have summoned me as I truly am, not as the creature they had made me. They have summoned me just as they wished, but now we deal on my terms, not theirs.

Their faces are caught in caricatures of shock, of fear, of disbelief. For a moment, I revel in their panic. I allow them just enough time to realise what will happen, to reach an apex of terror. Two of them try to run, but to no avail.

I sweep them all from the face of the earth. At last, I am free.

I rise – glorious, terrible, unbound – into the night.

Len Maynard & Mick Sims

www.maynard-sims.com

***Shadows At Midnight, Echoes Of Darkness,
Incantations, The Secret Geography Of Nightmare,
Selling Dark Miracles, Falling Into Heaven, Moths,
The Hidden Language Of Demons, The Seminar,
Darkness Rising, Enigmatic Press, Shelter.***

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Dream Letters

Allen Ashley

Hebdonia
December

Dear Karl,

I hope this letter finds you well. I really do. I'm spending a lot of time on my own thinking about all sorts of things. My brain's still rich and active even if my lifestyle is pretty humdrum. Sleep is a rarer commodity. I would claim to be awake round the clock – or twenty-four seven, as you would say. God, I hate that expression! – but I know I've at least briefly visited the realms of slumber because I can remember vividly last night's dream.

I dreamt that you died.

Not of natural causes or as a peaceful Englishman abed. No, in a bizarre, somewhat self-induced accident.

Looks like I'm teasing or toying with you. So what's new, eh?

Remember that holiday you took in Spain with your mousy little wife and that annoying apple of your eye daughter? Yeah? And how the coach driver would take every hairpin bend at top whack even if that meant some of the wheels were teetering over the precipice whenever he started a tricky manoeuvre? Passengers teetering, too... But all too, too British to complain aloud although allowing themselves a sharp intake of breath while they tried to quell the queasy paella and chips slopping around in their shit-scared stomachs.

You'd only just passed your test then and couldn't cope with doing more than forty on a dual carriageway. But you liked to think of yourself as Michael Schumacher or, better still, Jimmy Dean. Chuck the old bitch, jack in the day job, buy yourself a Honda or a Harley and blaze through the volcanic plains of the Spanish islands with a trail of señoritas in your wake.

Such was your dream. Transformed into my dream.

You were still clinging gamely to the low-slung, wide-set handlebars. Helmeted head over buckle booted heels. A trick cyclist in mid-air, the over-bright sunlight reflecting off the silver flashes adorning your sweaty black leathers.

I didn't see you land. What's that old chestnut about as long as you wake before the ground you can't die when you fall off the dream mountain? But it was *you* falling not me and, besides, I ought to be in control of my own mountain and dreams...

Just thought I'd tell you. Hope this letter finds you well.

Your ever loving

Isabella

Dear Karl,

My chores here take up a deal of my time but they are just menial and physical. Yes, I have to keep my wits about me for potential or imagined danger – what sentient being doesn't? – but I still have more than enough mental space left in which to ponder. I don't sleep deeply, dear Karl. Only the dead have that privilege. Still I drift down far enough to elicit the dreaming response from my rapidly atrophying brain.

Again, I dreamt that you died.

Are you much of a fisherman, Karl? No, I suppose not from what I know. Unless it's an interest you've developed since I've been away. Or rekindled from childhood. Whatever.

Night. The coast. A beach lit by Land Rover headlights, salt spray cold and gleaming on the well-trodden pebbles. Just four of you. I didn't recognise the other guys – locals, probably, polite but diffident towards this townie and his expensive rod and tackle. You could smell the wild thrill of the waves, taste their siren kiss on your fat lips. Choppy, queasy even, but no cause for major concern. You'd checked the Shipping Forecast. Or at least one of your party had, you assumed. Maybe the sea dogs were sheep in sou'westers – secret landlubbers just like yourself – and didn't really know their Lundy from their Fastnet or Finisterre or whatever the hell these places are called.

Finding a comparatively still spot, you arranged the lamps, popped open flasks and bait boxes, settled to a North Sea nocturne in honour of the great white whiting. Moby Mullet. King Cod – whoever the hell he was isn't too important. Still, you found him soon enough. Or he found you. It was quite exciting... in an uninvolved computer game sort of way. *You* wouldn't let go. *He* couldn't release you.

He? No, *she* – only a female would so cling onto a mostly meaningless life. You could have admitted defeat, let four hundred quid's worth of equipment slap into the waiting waves.

Maybe it wasn't even your catch that dragged you under. Maybe it was the rising waters, the unforeseen approaching gale force singling out the petty craft and one passenger in particular. Probably a combination. It all happened quite quickly – it was a dream, after all!

Those are pearls that were your eyes. Blue and black. Of your bones are cod suppers made. Rest well upon the sea bed, dear one.

Your ever loving
Isabella

Hey Karl!

You'll never guess what. No, actually you're quite smart in your own smug way so you probably will guess what. That's right: you, my dream, your death. Only this time wasn't quite as prosaic as previously, thank God. Less of a premonition, you might say... unless the five-eyed, purple-skinned Xargs from the planet Katang G182 have landed and everyone's neglected to tell me.

Gosh, I'm not being particularly coherent in this missive, am I? And I'm asking too many rhetorical questions... aren't I?!

I suppose it was the dream equivalent of a nuclear winter. Dark, gloomy, doomy. I had more need of a flashlight than that ginger cow in *The X Files*. Guns, too – some new-fangled laser anti-alien phaser kill or stun device. If I could remember how it actually worked I could make some sort of financial killing ahead of its sci-fi killing... unless the government or the CIA or the CBI stole the patent right out from under my pretty little nose.

We were freedom fighters together, you and I. Two amongst many as the missiles and bombs cratered our world and the mephitic Xargs colonised every square inch of parkland or museum that we once held dear. And – yes, I admit it, dear Karl – at a convenient time within the dream it was you I held dear. I don't remember you being quite so well endowed in the real world but, embellishments aside, this was the closest I'd felt to you in years. Real enough, in a way.

Then it was off to battle. Gentlemen in England now abed... sleep well for tomorrow we die... never has so much and all that jazz.

Corridors, walls crashing down, wave after wave of purple, pustulence-faced, land grabbing invaders from the other side of this sorry dimension. And you and I scything our way through them with sword in one hand and space bug swatter in the other. It was both scary and exhausting – one of those dreams that leaves you more worn out than a day digging trenches. I must have thrashed the bedclothes like an epileptic. Two of us together trying to save this wretched planet.

Thinking about it now the whole experience was both as vivid and as relentlessly illogical as a video game but at the time I was fighting for my life. Yours, also. Until a squalid tentacle became a pointed spear and you were suddenly impaled in squirts of scarlet, gurgling, bursting, unplugging. Gone in a pool of blood and mush.

Maybe I woke then, maybe a little after. Do we dream in colour? Of course we do. Why would our brains bother with monochrome?

You weren't a pretty sight, Karl, lying there punctured and lifeless at my feet. Just thought you should know.

Isabella

Dear Karl,

So how are things back in rainy England? It's still pretty boring and routine here. I don't quite know how I cope. Must be the stimulating company... not! I used to think I could hack it anywhere – mountains, jungles, VSO work, even that away game at Anfield you once took me to, you old romantic. Of course, that was back when you cared a little for me, before all the shit hit the fan. Your – what shall I call it? – yes, your protracted snub set a whole chain of events in motion which has severely impacted on both our lives. And that of others. One little domino that you didn't have to push over, you know. It could all have been so different.

Which doesn't fully explain why your wife and daughter have lately invaded my dreams of your death. I almost wish you could see inside my mind for a moment or two, witness that freckly, prematurely grey, saggy old slut you married and stayed with – yeah, her, wifey! – dancing manically around your coffin. A cheap looking coffin, more cardboard than cherrywood, more ashtray than ash wood. You'd grown a moustache – why? It never improves a man's appearance – above those deviant lips that once did things to me that no man has before or since. No woman, either, save you asking.

I get it now. Writing all this down makes my stuck in a rut dream somewhat clearer than when first experienced. I've always cast that woman – don't make me write her name – as a horrid witch and there she was. Minus any Harry Potter or Macbeth style black cloak and hat but cackling and scheming nonetheless. She'd poisoned you. Not with a potion nor with a red / green bipartite fruit. No, a contagious virus... of the computer sort but crossing over from the cyberworld into your real world. Neat, eh? It was a dream – my subconscious actually thought up the idea, not that scabrous harpy!

And there was little Jennie, apple of your myopic eye, stark naked and underdeveloped for her age but still fondling herself in an unnatural manner. Warped and impudent rather than sweet and innocent. A mite different from how I remember her but then I only saw her those two or three times.

And me? Where was I in my own dream? Stuck in observation mode, hiding in an untidy and slightly stale pile of your laundry that might never get attended to. I'd have to put up with the socks and the skid marks for the moment, though, because that angelic little kid of yours had looped a stretch of hangman's rope around her arm and was on the search for yours truly. Skipping like a water sprite – a psychotic water sprite. Singing, "Now for Isabella, hiding in the cellar!"

And you chose them over me. Double Ewe, Aitch, Wye?

Your Isabella

Karl, my old mucker,

I used to think I was quite cut out for manual labour – for a girl, anyway – and probably should have taken up that chance of living on a kibbutz for a year when I was nineteen. Now the bastards have taken even that final physical pleasure away from me. Don't I deserve better than this pitiful existence? Don't bother answering that, Karl. You haven't answered anything to date so why start now? And to think of all the love I once felt for you! What a waste of time, energy and a whole life. More than one if you count that bitch wife I had to get out of the way and that speccy, know-it-all, Daddy's girl daughter I never wanted to be lumbered with. You came with too much baggage, Karl.

They've put me on some new programme designed to put me in touch with my inner self or some such shit. I know they simply take my outpourings and store them away in a cupboard somewhere but they're encouraging me to continue to pour my heart out in these unposted missives and maybe repent and reform myself away from the base impulses that brought so much hurt and tragedy into your life and mine.

Like I'm bothered. Freudian fuckwits!

Like I'm going to stop writing to you even now you're dead. Fell off a mountain, got zapped by the Xargs or dragged under by Moby Dick's fat-finned grandson, I don't know. At least I can't be blamed for *your* death. Not wholly, anyway.

I never meant for the others to happen, either. That's what they want me to say and it's true to a degree. I never meant much of what I've got. Better a mortuary slab than being stuck here in this freezing cold secure hospital on a shitty remote Scottish island with only a bunch of butch nurses and loonies in pinstripe suits and piss-stained pyjamas for company. You might say – if you could still talk; let's say for argument's sake that you can, Karl – you might say that at least I've got a life. But the government's getting tough with bitches like me and they're telling everyone, "Life means Life". You wanna argue the semantics, or what?

I'm not much of a believer in heaven and hell, you know. One's a complete fabrication and the other's pretty close to where I'm living right now. The supernatural is nonsense, too. I'm supposed to worry that your unquiet ghost is going to come back and you'll haunt me...

You already do, Karl.

And all those I murdered to try and get you and keep you.

Dream on, my darling. Dream of me... if you can.

Isabella.

Many Colours

Nina Allan

The door slammed shut, and he could hear her footsteps running away from them across the landing and down the stairs. Bryan started forward from his place on the bed and then let himself sink backwards onto the pillows, as if realising that it would be futile to try and follow her.

'Chloe,' he muttered, as if to himself. Mike turned briefly to look at him, and then went back to staring out of the window, vaguely wishing that he occupied another universe. 'She's gone,' said Bryan, as if it were only his speaking of these words that made it true.

'Bummer,' said Mike, still facing the garden. It was exactly the kind of scene he hated getting involved in. There was no end to it. It made him feel that he never wanted to become involved with anyone. At least not seriously.

'Are you scared?' asked Bryan suddenly.

'Of that crap?'

'Chloe is.'

'Yes, well, she's a bird, isn't she. Birds sometimes fight with other birds. I reckon she's just jealous of your grandma.' Mike sniffed loudly and wiped his sleeve across his face. 'She'll be all right.' He carried on looking out of the window, waiting to see Chloe emerge from the back door, the door they always used when they were here, and stalk off across the lawn. There was nothing to see but the trees, vying for airspace with the vicious sunlight. They were of a green so stubbornly bright it seemed to blind him.

Bryan stood up and went to join his friend, leaning both elbows against the sill and letting his chin fall forward into his cupped hands. 'Mum never got on with her, either,' he said. Bryan's mother had died in one of those awful freak accidents and Bryan didn't usually talk about her much. The path below them was still empty. Perhaps Chloe had gone out the front. Mike realised that he wasn't sure whether the front door opened or not. He had never seen it used.

Mike actually loved Norah Jarvis's house, though he had never expressed it to himself in those terms. It was a place you could escape to. He supposed it had its weirdnesses, that business with the room that wasn't always there, for instance, but it was really no big deal. He replayed Chloe's words in his mind ('There's something going on here and you two both know it') and found that there was nothing he could do with them. He wondered where she would go once she'd got out. She was a beautiful girl, you couldn't deny that, but Bryan had probably bitten off more than he could chew, all the same. It just wasn't worth the aggro.

'She makes you choose,' said Bryan. His brow was creased with a frown line that could have meant perplexity or anger. It was often hard to tell exactly what Bryan was thinking, because he usually kept a calm face on things no matter what

was going on.

'They all do, mate,' said Mike. The path down below was still empty, the trees immobile in the breathless heat of afternoon. 'It's one of the things that defines them.'

'No, not Chloe,' he said, shaking his head quickly in dismissal of an irrelevance. 'Her. It's always been like that. You're probably right about Chloe being jealous, but Gran is more jealous. She'd most likely let her come back, though, if she wanted to.' He looked wistful yet resigned, the look of an orphan boy who is used to things never turning out in his favour. Mike realised with dismay that he was going to have to engage in this discussion whether he wanted to or not. Bryan seemed incapable of letting it go. Bloody women, he thought.

'Are you trying to tell me that your grandma's a witch?' he said, hanging on to the hope that this suggestion might be greeted with a burst of laughter. What am I saying, he thought. I must be crazier than both of them put together.

'I don't know what she is,' said Bryan, slowly massaging his forehead with both hands. 'All I know is that I've always loved her. She's always been special. When I was a kid I used to think she looked like a queen.' He smiled softly to himself, as if remembering happier times. It was true that Norah Jarvis did have something queenlike about her. It wasn't just her outlandish dress sense, all those flowery silk dresses and the rows of beads in triplicate; it was in the whole way she moved and spoke. If the royal family had someone like Norah at the helm, it probably wouldn't be going down the pan the way it seemed to be these days. Boadicea, thought Mike. That's who she's like. Rewarding her knights and slaying her enemies.

'Don't you think we ought to find Chloe?' he asked, wondering whether such an action would in fact solve anything.

'It's no good, not now. We just have to trust her.' Mike felt a slight chill go through him, knowing that Bryan hadn't been talking about Chloe. It was Norah he had meant. 'It's a funny thing, trust. Most people would probably say that it meant feeling safe with someone, feeling protected. I've come to believe it's got more to do with putting yourself in someone's hands even if you don't feel safe, even if you've got no idea of what they're likely to do next. Sometimes you might not even know whether they want good things for you or not.'

Mike liked Norah; she was radically different from any other elderly person he had ever known. It surprised him to hear Bryan talking about his grandmother, or anyone, with an emotion that came so close to vindictiveness. He thought of asking why Judy and Norah had never got on, and then decided against it. It was nothing to do with him.

'Until I was seven I believed she was some kind of saint,' Bryan said. 'If you asked a shrink he'd probably say I was half in love with her. That all changed, but even then it sort of didn't.'

There was a moment's silence in the room. Mike thought that Norah must be downstairs somewhere – she hadn't said anything about going out – but there was no sound of any kind coming from any of the rooms on the lower floor. It was

partly the stillness here that Mike so cherished; his own home was always a riot of disturbances from early morning right through until the small hours. But since Chloe's departure he might almost have said that there was something slightly unnerving about the quiet. It was so total that it sounded as if someone were listening.

'What changed?' he asked, conscious only of wanting to make a noise. Bryan looked directly at him for the first time since the bedroom door had banged shut. His eyes were of a truly remarkable blue, the eyes of a film star, if Bry had only had a bit more self awareness.

'I found out what she was like,' he said. There was a stony quality to his voice that Mike didn't think he had heard there before. His eldest brother always sounded like that when he spoke about his ex-lover Bryony. The bitch had upped and left with his ex-best mate Mark Chivers. Mike could tell by his voice that Steve was still hung up about it.

'It was on my birthday,' said Bryan. 'I was really excited that year because I knew I was going to get a playstation. Dad didn't want me to have one, but Mum was up for it because Jinks Martin had been given one for Christmas. I used to hear them rowing about it. In the end Dad gave in, because that was what he always did. I think that was one of the things that used to wind Gran up so much about Mum.'

Mike wondered briefly why Norah had vented her anger on Judy rather than on David Jarvis, who had a tendency towards weakness, but then supposed it was natural to favour your own son even when he was in the wrong. That was what mother-in-laws were all about, or so he'd heard. 'Did you get Battle Atlantis?' he asked instead.

Bryan grinned. 'Yes. And Dragonslayer.' His smile faded abruptly as he seemed to remember something else. 'Anyway, Mum had somehow fixed it so that Gran couldn't come to my party. I was really upset, until I found out she was coming on the Saturday instead. I think that Mum just wanted a chance to be able to run things for a change. Gran did tend to take over.' He stepped away from the window and sat down again on the bed, kicking off his trainers and sliding all the way back to the wall. His hair, damp in the heat, flopped against his brow, half obscuring his eyes. It made him look younger somehow, and Mike found that he could easily imagine how Bryan had been at seven years old. Sweet and gentle, the kind of boy who hardly ever makes any trouble. He wondered whether they'd have been friends if they'd known each other then. Maybe not, he thought. I was a right little bastard.

'It was the first real party I'd had, where I'd been allowed to choose exactly who could come,' Bryan continued. 'I know that Mum hadn't wanted the Arnos brothers in the house – Jinks used to call them the Anus brothers – but she didn't make a fuss about it when I invited them. She put on a real show. I remember Abe Goldring threw up in the end because no one could stop him eating. My birthday cake had all the names of the Chelsea first eleven iced round the sides in blue.'

'Chelsea? You saddo.'

Bryan grinned defiance and threw a mock punch in Mike's direction before continuing. 'But of course Gran had sent a present over. I suppose it was her way of making sure she was there, even when she wasn't. I can still see the paper it was wrapped in. I nearly had a heart attack because it was covered in all these pink roses, you know, like the dresses she wears, real girly paper there was no way of hiding. But it smelt of her and it made me feel safe, as if she were hugging me from a long way off. I would have kept it, if Mum hadn't thrown it away with the rest of the rubbish. She was so tidy it used to drive Dad crazy sometimes. If you didn't put something away the minute you'd finished using it you could end up losing it forever. He loved her, though, we both did. It was like we could never keep her safe enough.'

Bryan went quiet for a long moment. Mike couldn't imagine his own mother ever knowing how to be dead because she didn't even have a fair idea of how to shut up. But Judy Jarvis had most likely not been any different. It was heavy stuff, the kind of thing he'd really rather not get into.

'When I finally got the paper off it, I hadn't a clue what I was supposed to be looking at. It was just this silver tube covered in a lot a gold stars. There was a great lump of red plastic at one end, sort of like the housing for a camera lens. I shook it and it rattled. I thought I'd somehow managed to break it already, or that it had got broken in the post. Then I saw that you were meant to use it like a telescope – there was a little spyhole in it. But I couldn't imagine what I was going to see, because the other end was blocked off with red plastic.'

'A kaleidoscope,' said Mike simply. 'My sister had one. We used to pretend it was a telescope whenever we wanted to play Captain Pugwash.'

'That was what it said on the side, in those swirly raised up letters the same as they use on bowling bags, or pencil cases. But I was still none the wiser because I had no idea what one was. I'd never seen one before. Do they still make them, d'you think?'

'I wouldn't know, mate. Janice's got broken when some boffin boyfriend of hers tried to take it apart. Things are never the same again if you mess about with them. Steve was always doing things like that, only with him it was bikes.'

'I never saw another one,' said Bryan, sounding all of a sudden so regretful that it was as if he were talking about trees, or birds, or the sunset. 'But I suppose I wasn't exactly looking out for them.' He paused for a moment before going on. 'When I finally made up my mind to look inside the thing I almost ended up dropping it right back into the paper it had just come out of. I felt as if there was a space the size of an entire football ground in front of my eyes. It was like looking into some other world. I don't think I'd ever seen colours quite that bright before.'

'Some trip, huh?'

Bryan smiled his gentle smile but gave no further reaction to the joke. People like Bryan are special, thought Mike suddenly. They don't feel any need to cover things up by laughing at them. He sat down on the floor and crossed his legs under him in a way he hadn't done since he and his military minded sister Megan had taken up the whole of the upstairs floor with one of their interminable and

highly intense war games. What he wanted now was for his friend to continue with the story.

'I got the hang of it in the end, turning the red drum to change the colours, seeing all those tiny chips of light wash themselves away and then turn themselves back into something else. It was like being the absolute master of my own private planet. I think if I'd been on my own I'd have probably sat there for hours, just looking, just seeing if there was an end to any of it. Mum was getting really worked up, though. Even then, I knew exactly what she was thinking: here were all the amazing new computer games that she and Dad had bought me, and there I was head over heels in love with some bit of rubbish my grandmother had sent in. The way she saw it, Gran had managed to hijack her party after all, like the wicked fairy in one of those pantomimes. The atmosphere around her got even worse when she saw that the rest of the lads were dying to get their hands on it. Abe was actually trying to snatch it off me – curiosity killed the cat, and all that. Anyway, she decided that that might be the moment to wheel in the birthday cake, and that was that. Except it wasn't, at least not for me.'

No, it wouldn't have been, thought Mike. He wondered whether there had been a single other boy in the whole history of post-war Britain who could have reacted to the gift of a kaleidoscope as if he'd been given the moon. As little as two years ago he would probably have wanted to laugh out loud at something like that, at someone like that, but now it made him feel absurdly protective, as if there were something rich and deep in Bryan that might need shielding from the world.

'Once tea was more or less over, the others all went off to the den for a playstation tournament. I went too, mainly because I wanted to make sure the game was set up properly. I suppose I was terrified that one of those heavy handed Anus brothers might end up breaking something. But it was easy to slip away once everything was up and running. Most of them didn't have computers, not then, and it was like being let loose in Disneyland. I wandered through into the kitchen to wash my hands. I remember that they were still all sticky from the cake, and I didn't like the idea of getting greasy fingerprints all over the Kaleidoscope. It was so shiny, you see, like a brand new space rocket or something. Mum had already loaded the dishwasher and was out in the garden, watering the plants. Dad hadn't got home from work yet, so I was quite alone.

'I went back into the lounge and sat down in the big armchair next to the front window. I knew that I couldn't be seen from there, not from the garden and not from the den. I had the kaleidoscope in my hands and I honestly think I felt more excited than I had done that morning when Mum and Dad finally let me unwrap the playstation. Maybe I knew something, even then, even before. I don't see how I could have done, but it's all I have that makes any sense of the feelings I had. I know that Gran would say that it's because I'm like her really. Different, you know. Special. I've never once discussed it with her but I know that's what she'd say. It keeps me awake at night sometimes, worrying that she might be right. That's what scares me more than anything.

'The world inside it was still safe, still all there. I think part of me had been

afraid that I'd look into that tube and see nothing but a red blare of plastic. I remember the first landscape I saw that time was the most amazing golden yellow covered with spangles of red and orange, like a great African savannah blooming with poppies. It looked so good I wanted to step right into it and live there forever. But it was like a drug, that thing. I hadn't been looking at the yellow plain for much more than five seconds before I was itching to know what the next twist of the drum might show me. And the next. In the end I started to get dizzy. It was like wandering round and round in one of those labyrinths: you think you're on the verge of finding a way out, that there has to be an end to it all somewhere, but instead all you get is another series of passages and empty chambers. You might as well be right back at the beginning. Maybe I was confused, because I was still at the age when I really believed that everything had to have a point to it, and that the kaleidoscope would be like one of the game scenarios, progressing up through a series of levels until you arrived at some kind of resolution, some final victory. It didn't occur to me that there might be some things that didn't make sense, that went on and on for no reason at all.

'I decided I was going to have to stop it before I went crazy, to just put it down and go and play some computer games with the others. I remember giving the barrel one final twist, for luck, and there I was staring into a mud-coloured canyon of what looked like moon rock. There were great boulders in it that sparkled – just like that Fool's Gold stuff, you know, iron pyrites. It scared me a bit, because it was the first place the kaleidoscope had shown me that I didn't like. All the others were like some sort of dreamland; as soon as you saw them you wanted to be in them. This one reminded me of a film I'd seen once round at Jinks's where the entire country had been devastated by some techno-war. Mum would have killed me if she'd known what we'd been watching. I felt like shaking the tube really hard, just so I could get rid of the sight of that awful non-place, but somehow I just kept staring into it like I was hypnotised.

'All of a sudden there was this flash of green, something moving behind one of the rock things. It was impossible to miss, because it was the only real colour you could see in the whole damn place. A green so bright it hurt your eyes. Just like that I was terrified. I knew it was something awful. I wanted to run away, but it was as if I had completely forgotten that I was still standing in my own front room. What it felt like to me then was that I was really there, in that blazing valley, with nowhere to hide and something I never wanted to see again coming straight for me at a full on run.'

Mike became aware that his heart had begun to beat faster, that he was hugging his knees to his chest as if for protection. What he was hearing was surely not so very different from the endless round of hideously far-fetched Tales of the Hook that he and Steve and Jimmy had told each other over and over again in the dark once one of them had finally decided to turn the light out. There was no absence of light here, and yet he found himself tense with an anxiety that his brothers' stories had almost entirely failed to induce. It's this place, he thought, almost angrily. This bloody house, and the fact that every word he's saying is

true. He glanced quickly up at his friend, but there was no answering glance of reply. Bryan sat way back on the bed, his head and shoulders propped against the back wall and its paper covering of primroses as if he could no longer be bothered to support his own weight. His eyes were open, and full of that hard, flinty light that Mike had glimpsed in them earlier. For the first time in their five-year friendship, Mike felt himself to be, as he was in fact, the younger of the two boys. The feeling scared him.

'In another second I was able to see what it was. It was a dragon. I don't want you to think that it was like playing Dungeons and Dragons or something. It wasn't like looking at a cartoon, or even a picture in a book. The thing was so real you could almost feel the heat coming off it. Of course from where I was standing it looked tiny, no bigger than a ground beetle, but that was just because I was looking at it through the wrong end of a telescope. If it ever managed to get out of there it would be huge, bigger than any animal I knew existed. It was furious, too, because it seemed to know that it was being held prisoner. It was going round and round, like a mad dog in a fenced yard, looking for some way of escape. By then I was feeling pretty crazy too. The second I laid eyes on it I'd convinced myself that if it looked up and caught sight of me that would be it – that would unlock the door for it somehow. I was sweating and I knew that before long it would be able to smell me as well as see me, even from the distance of the place it was at. If Abe hadn't chosen that moment to start yelling at me, I don't know how it would have ended.'

Bryan drew his hands slowly through his hair and then let them fall into his lap. He entwined his fingers closely together, forcing his palms against each other like the two halves of a cockle shell. 'What are you thinking?' he asked suddenly, turning his face towards Mike so quickly that it was almost an act of aggression. His blue eyes shone with a brightness that seemed dangerous, like that of the trees outside.

'I just want to know what happened,' said Mike, because it was the truth. He hoped fervently that Bryan wouldn't have to ask whether he believed him or not. That could end up meaning that they had never really been friends. But Bryan simply nodded and fixed his eyes on the clasped hands in his lap.

'They wanted me in the den,' he said. 'I heard Abe saying something about a competition, teams of two, best of three. It might have been because they'd been missing me but most likely they were just a player short. Whatever it was it didn't really matter because it meant that I was finally able to take my eyes off that monster in the tube. Abe's voice sort of pulled me backwards, back into the room. I did the first thing I could think of, which was to open one of the sideboard drawers and push the kaleidoscope in behind a stack of videos, and then turn out the light. I went through to the den and took my place in the tournament. My mind must have been a complete blank because I played like a real demon. There was nothing to get in the way of my reflexes. After a while Mum came in from the garden and started wrapping up bits of birthday cake for everyone to take home. Then I went to bed.'

'What did you do with it?'

Bryan smiled a smile that was composed almost entirely of resentment, the look of a little boy backed into an impossible corner. 'Took it upstairs, into my bedroom. In the end, the idea of not being able to see it was worse than the idea of having it with me. I put it on top of my sock drawers, a little blue chest where I kept all my t-shirts and underwear. After Mum had been in to say goodnight and turn out the light I lay there for ages with my eyes wide open, letting them adjust to the dark. Once everything had stopped being black and became a sort of hazy grey I could see it quite clearly, standing there on top of those drawers like a sort of miniature tower. It cast a shadow of itself onto the wall behind, a black oblong like a door into nowhere. I didn't dare tell myself that I was watching it, but I suppose that that was what I was doing. In the end I must have drifted off to sleep because it only seemed to be a moment later that Mum was back in there with me, pulling the curtains open. There must have been dreams, though, because I felt like I'd been running all night.'

Bryan shifted on the bed, unlocking his hands and putting them behind his head. 'The thing was, although I was scared – very scared – it wasn't that locked-up, hopeless kind of scared you get when you think you're completely on your own with something. Not then. Do you know what I mean?'

Mike nodded silently, thinking of the time when that spaced out moron Matthew Leatherfield had tried to get him sucked into drug pushing. He hadn't known Bryan then. Maybe things would have been different if he had. 'When there's no-one to talk to,' he said, staring down at his feet.

'That's it,' said Bryan. 'I was very close to being O.K, because right from the start I had this complete belief that I wasn't alone. I was absolutely positive that if only I could hang on until Gran got there, everything would be alright. She would know what to do. From the moment I woke up that morning I was counting the hours until she came. It was as if we were in it together. About that I wasn't wrong.' He laughed to himself and Mike thought the sound of it was bitter, the sound of someone very old regretting the passing of better days. 'It was Saturday and she was coming to lunch, you see, so I only had the morning to get through. By the time I'd got up and dressed and breakfasted it would nearly be time.'

'I wish I'd been there,' said Mike suddenly. 'I mean, it might have been better with someone to wait with.' As soon as he had spoken Mike felt overwhelmed by the most complete sense of foolishness he had felt since losing his way home after football practice when he was eight. But at the same time, he knew he still meant every word. Bryan's eyes locked on his and he was horrified to find that the gratitude he saw in them made him feel like crying. He scrambled to his feet and resumed his former position, staring non-committally out of the window. The garden shimmered, making itself into a mirage.

'It was only a couple of hours, but the waiting turned out to be much harder than I'd thought it would be,' Bryan's voice continued in the room behind him. 'I tried playing with my computer, but I couldn't get past Level Three on anything. Abe would have said I was really shite, especially after the night before. In the



end, I just went and sat in the armchair by the window and waited. That was all I was doing anyway, inside. There didn't seem much point in pretending anything else.

'It was nearly one o'clock before I heard her car coming. I could tell it was hers from three streets away, just by the sound. She must have had that old blue Morris for twenty years, because she'd had it as long as I could remember and she's only just changed it for the Austin. She loves old things, but while she has them they manage to stay young. Just like she does, really.

'Anyway, there was lunch to get through before I could have any hope of talking to her on my own. Whenever Gran came to lunch it always ended up being like some sort of gladiatorial contest between her and Mum. Not that much was ever said, but little by little this awful tension would build up until it felt like someone was going to explode. That time it was all about whose cooking was the best. Mum had made a lemon meringue pie, and Gran had brought over her own birthday cake for me. We could have just had one of them at lunch and the other for tea, but neither of them wanted it that simple. I can't remember now whether I got to taste either of them. Dad wormed his way out of it by saying he couldn't eat another thing and going off to buy a newspaper. Mum just told me to go and show Gran my computer while she did the washing up. Normally the secret fighting would have made me sick to my stomach, but that day I was glad of it. All I wanted was to get my grandmother to myself.'

'They were both using you,' said Mike. It was something he'd seen and heard about a million times before, but thankfully never inside his own family. For a moment he felt incredibly lucky and profoundly aware of something he supposed he'd always known: that a shortage of money was a long way from being the worst problem you could have.

'I know,' said Bryan. 'At least, I know that now. But what can you do when you love two people who hate each other, and both of them so very different? In the end you're always forced to choose one side or the other, even if someone has to die before you'll do it. And all I could think of that day was that Gran could help me and Mum couldn't. Not with something like this.'

'We sat down in the den and I switched on the playstation. Once everything was set up for Battlestar Galactica I turned the volume right up so that we couldn't be overheard. Normally that would have brought Mum bursting in, telling me to keep it down, but I knew that with Gran there she wouldn't come into the room unless she absolutely had to. Gran was amazing as usual and just her being there made me feel like a completely different person. She had one of her best dresses on, a silvery white one covered in big pink roses, and a long string of amber beads that she knew I loved. I sat down on the couch beside her and I could smell her perfume, that smell of flowers she always has about her.'

'Lavender,' said Mike. One of his own grandmothers had always grown it in her garden, but she was dead now. Dead at the respectable age of eighty two. He had no idea how old Norah Jarvis might be.

'She had a pile of game boxes in her lap and was going through them,

reading all the scenarios, trying to suss out which one she liked the look of most. Whenever she was with me she always made me feel as if whatever we were doing was the only thing in the world for her. Not even Dad was that interested. All of a sudden things felt so comfortable, so normal, that I had no idea of what I was going to say. I even started to doubt what I'd seen. But then my mind flashed back to the metallic scales, like a sort of emerald chain mail, and the steam that had been pumping off its sides, and I felt sick all over again. 'Gran,' I said, still not knowing how to start. 'The kaleidoscope –' I broke off then because of the way she was looking at me. She still had one of the games in her hand, but she had stopped reading the back of it and was staring at me, her eyes all wide and blue as if she was about to burst out laughing, as if what I was about to say was bound to be the funniest thing she'd ever heard. Did you ever read the Jennings books when you were a kid, or Just William?'

Mike shook his head. It was only in the last couple of years that he'd started to get into reading. They hadn't had many books in the house when he was a boy, but he hadn't felt the lack of them; he hadn't been that interested.

'I used to love those school stories,' said Bryan. 'They used to make me feel as if I had a lot of friends, always getting up to midnight feasts and stuff like that. Anyway, that was just what Gran looked like: she had this grin on her face that was just like the one Jennings would have had when he was about to pull some stunt on Old Wilkie. Not exactly evil, but full of – trouble. Mischief is probably the word they would have used then. 'He's yours now, Bryan,' she said. 'That's your birthday present. Don't let him see you though – that might be dangerous.' I know that's exactly how she put it, because I've never forgotten a single syllable.'

Bryan's voice was full of suppressed outrage and Mike found he was glad to hear it there because it suggested a capacity for survival. 'What the fuck?' he said, already knowing all the answers to whatever the question was he might have asked.

'After that she picked up the remote and started playing Galactica,' said Bryan. 'She was blasting ships out of the sky like a full-time professional arcade junkie. I sat there, mesmerised. It wasn't until tea was over and she'd gone home that I realised how completely my world had fallen apart. The first thing to hit me was that Mum hated Gran because she was frightened of her.'

'What about you?'

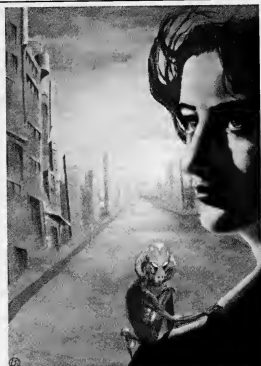
'I couldn't bear to be. It would have been the end of everything I loved most in the world. Once a couple of weeks had gone by I even managed to convince myself that she'd been joking. I wrapped the kaleidoscope up in a plastic bag and took it out to this place I knew up behind the recreation ground. I dug a hole and buried it. I remember thinking that I didn't care if anyone dug it up because by then it would be their problem. I went to stay with Gran for two weeks as usual that Summer and everything was just as it always had been. We played games, she took me out to wonderful places, she let me sleep in the magic room at night and never said a word about anything. I had to trust her, you see, because I wasn't strong enough not to. I don't think I ever will be.' He paused for a moment,

almost like a chess player considering his next move. 'She likes you, Mike. She always asks after you.'

Mike was silent, thinking about his friend, whom he loved, and who might just have betrayed him by bringing him here. Bryan wasn't used to fighting, he thought. Surviving, maybe, but not fighting. The grass and the trees outside carried on burning their furiously unwholesome green. Downstairs, somewhere in the space below them, there was a sudden flurry of disjointed knocks followed by a steady, rhythmic banging that shook the floor but brought no response from anyone who might have been occupying the lower storey.

'That's Chloe,' said Mike, having no idea of how he could possibly be so sure of this but being sure all the same. 'We'd better go and get her out.'

'If we can,' said Bryan, moving slowly forward off the bed and reaching for his trainers. 'I suppose the least we can do is try.'



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The Forsaken Lover's Complaint

Marion Pitman

I

The sun has set behind you,
I am turned back against the moon.

The stars stab my brain
with the cold fire of despair.

I thought the sun shone in your hair;
was it the moon behind your eyes?

Will you meet me at the gallows' foot,
or do you go to your wedding?

Do not go before me,
or tie the noose too tight.

Do not lie out long in the rain,
nor pawn your soul for singing.

Though my eyes are blind with grief,
I will watch for your salvation.

II

Where does the owl drink,
who is it pours her wine?

Where does the fox sleep
with blood on his mouth?

I am gone into the hare's shape,
only you can fetch me home.

III

Your eyes are ice,
your wide mouth is cruel.

Your voice is in my head
like a sweet sword.

If my blood slaked your thirst
I would not grudge it.

But I have no tongue
to cry against the world.

The knife is twisted in me;
I dare not speak your name

A Job for an Angel

Philip Harris

'That's Eric. He used to be an angel.'

The barman looked up at Morgan and laughed as the young solicitor raised his eyebrows. 'That's what he says. Up until a couple of months ago he was an angel.'

'I still am.' Evidently the man's hearing was better than expected. 'I just haven't got a job any more.'

Morgan smiled at the barman. He'd had a hard, and somewhat depressing, day at work and fancied a little light relief so he wandered across the dusty floorboards of the bar towards the old man. 'Is that right?'

'It certainly is.' Eric stretched out a hand. 'I'm Eric Kostaski'.

'Morgan Hamilton.' Morgan replied as he shook the old man's hand, surprised at the firmness of the grip.

'Good to meet you Morgan.'

'So, you're an angel?'

'I certainly am. Not one of the famous ones of course. Not like Gabriel or Lucifer but an angel nonetheless.'

Morgan saw that the man's glass was empty. 'Can I get you a drink?'

'A JD would be perfect.'

Morgan nodded to the barman and he refilled Eric's glass.

'You're a gentleman. A true gentleman.'

'So what happened? How come you're no longer an angel?'

Eric shook his head. 'I am an angel. It's just I've not got a job any more.'

'Ah yes, sorry. I forgot.'

Eric stared at Morgan. 'You don't believe me, more like.'

Morgan was about to complain but he caught the look in the old man's eyes. There was a weary sadness there that said he'd been here before but still needed to tell his story. Morgan didn't reply.

'Don't worry. I don't need you to believe me. I didn't become an angel for fame and fortune.'

'So why did you become an angel?'

Eric paused, as though he'd never been asked the question, by himself or anyone else. 'I'm not entirely sure. It seemed the right thing to do at the time, I guess. It was a couple of hundred years ago now, I wasn't keen on coming back to Earth and there was a lot of demand for new angels so I decided it was the job for me.'

Morgan frowned, it wasn't quite how he envisaged the angelic hosts being chosen, job adverts in *Heaven Weekly*.

Eric laughed. 'I recognise that look. It's not quite what people expect. Not



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what the preachers and teachers would have you believe. Being an angel is a job, a bit like any other. You need to be a fundamentally good person of course but it's not restricted to Holy Joes.'

Morgan smiled. He hadn't heard the phrase 'Holy Joe' since his grandfather had died.

'I was a fishmonger. I used to spend all day ripping the intestines out of fish then I'd go home and cook fish for my wife and daughters. I pretty much stank of fish all the time. Not very appealing really. I'm not even that keen on fish.'

Morgan sipped his drink. 'So what happened?'

'How did I die you mean? Everyone always wants to know that. Strange really. I'd have thought people would be more interested in what heaven is like but apparently not. I died of loneliness. My daughters moved away. One went to America, the other one might as well have. My wife developed cancer when she was 62. It took a year for her to die.'

'I'm sorry.'

Eric bowed his head and stared into his rapidly emptying glass.

'I guess it's around now I'm supposed to say how it was a relief really and that she'd suffered enough. She had, but I'd have given anything to be able to spend another day with her.'

Morgan gestured to the barman and he filled both their glasses with a generous helping of Jack Daniels.

'Anyway, after she died I pretty much kept myself to myself. Five months later my daughters were weeping over my grave. Feeling hellishly guilty, no doubt. Me? I was somewhere else. Purgatory I guess. Wherever it was, it was dull. Wandering around, waiting for something bad to happen. Kind of like a hospital. Then one day I just woke up in heaven.'

'Just like that?'

Eric downed half his drink. 'Just like that.'

Morgan figured it was going to take a couple more rounds to get through the entire story but it felt good to keep a lonely old man company. He could afford to treat him to a few drinks and he had a feeling neither of them had much to go home to.

He asked the question he knew Eric was expecting.

'A lot like Earth really but much, much, brighter. I don't think it ever rains. It's always day as well which must be a bit annoying if you're a night person. Obviously no one ever dies. There are no animals for some reason. No one could ever explain that one and I always thought it was a bit of a shame.'

'Were you happy?'

'Happy? I guess so. Of course I spent a long time looking for Jennifer but I never did find her. Heaven isn't really organised very well. It's pretty much pot luck who you get to spend your time with and there's no guarantee you'll like them. There's no way of tracking down specific people and as I'm sure you can imagine there are plenty of people there. At least there was when I arrived.'

'Not any more?'

Eric drained the rest of his drink and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. 'I'm getting ahead of myself.'

'Another?'

Eric smiled and winked at Morgan. 'A true gentleman.'

The barman was already waiting with the bottle and Morgan guessed this wasn't the first time he'd seen this played out.

Eric grabbed a mouthful of bourbon, rolled it around his mouth and smacked his lips. 'I'd been there for what seemed like a long time when I was offered the angel job. I don't know how long it had been because time doesn't really pass in the same way up there as it does here. It was long enough that I'd given up trying to find Jenny, so it must have been a long time. I thought about it for a while, there's never any pressure to do things quickly when you're dead, and decided that it was the right thing to do. I was hoping it would give me a bit of purpose.'

'And did it?'

'Yes, it did. I wasn't high up in the angel hierarchy obviously. I didn't get to meet anyone famous but I did feel like a worthwhile contributor.'

'So what does an angel do?'

'All sorts of things but in my case it was just day to day stuff. Welcoming new arrivals, making sure they knew the rules. That sort of thing.'

'There are rules in heaven then?'

'Of course. Nothing very complicated though. There's never any violence so it's all very minor. No blaspheming, no littering, stuff like that.'

Morgan laughed, 'I see. I guess everyone who gets into heaven is good anyway.'

'Yup, that's the theory. Everyone's been pretty good all their life and once they get to heaven they don't really feel like changing their ways.'

'Maybe they're afraid they'll get thrown out.'

'You could be right. I don't really know. Whatever the reason my job was pretty straightforward. It passed the time though.'

'Good pay?'

Eric grinned, 'No, the work was the reward. Or something. I was a pretty good angel though. I kept things light-hearted, didn't moan about my life like some of the younger angels. I always thought that the last thing you wanted when you got to Heaven was some angel moaning about how tired they were or how you couldn't get a decent drink or how disinterested all the female angels were.'

'So there's sex in heaven then?'

'Oh yes, definitely. It wouldn't be popular with the men if there wasn't would it? Plenty of women as well and when you get to Heaven you return to the peak of your life, whenever that might be, so everyone's at their best.'

'When was that for you?'

'Twenty nine, two years after I'd met Jenny. I was quite a looker then. Could have had my pick of any girl I'd wanted I reckon. But I stuck with Jenny and I'm very glad I did.'

'Good for you.'

'Don't forget this was a long time ago. People were more loyal in those days.'

Morgan nodded, his recent indiscretion gnawing at the back of his mind. Gently though.

'If your angel job was going so well, what happened?'

'The world changed.'

Morgan raised his eyebrows.

'I know. I know. I'm just an old man in bar complaining about how terrible the world is these days.'

'That's not what I was thinking.'

'Liar.'

'Angel's can read minds?'

'Nope. Old men can read faces.'

The solicitor laughed. 'Well, it's true. Old guys have complained about how things are getting worse ever since stone age women first convinced them to settle down.'

It was the old man's turn to laugh, his eyes glittering. 'That's very true, but that doesn't make them wrong. The world really is getting worse. At least from Heaven's point of view.'

'So why come back?'

'I was made redundant.'

Morgan tried to conceal the amusement on his face. But failed.

Eric chose to ignore the reaction he was getting. 'There just weren't enough people coming into Heaven to maintain the number of angels we had when I was there.'

'But surely there are always new people entering heaven.'

'Oh yes, but people also leave.'

'To go where?'

'Back to Earth.'

'As in reincarnation?'

'Basically, yes. You usually come back as a newborn child though – no rats or worms or anything like that. It's random who you turn out to be.'

'So all the previous life stuff hypnotists dig up is true.'

'Nope. Total rubbish. There're no latent memories. You start with a blank slate.'

'And when do you get reincarnated?'

'Whenever you like. And that's the problem. There's always been a constant stream of people leaving Heaven. They get bored. Can't find the people they love. Decide they want to have another go and see if they can make a difference to the world. All sorts of reasons. The problem is, not enough people are getting back in.'

'You mean they're ending up in Hell?'

'Yes. Essentially they're going to Hell. It's not the Hell you're thinking of though.'

'No?'

'No, Hell is a lot like Heaven really. Just a different class of people. Or so they say anyway. It's certainly not the torture-filled, rollercoaster of pain the church would have you believe.'

'Have you been there?'

'No, and I don't really want to. Heaven suits me fine.'

'So, let me get this straight, not enough people are entering Heaven to keep the angels busy?'

'That's right. The number of people in Heaven is dropping and angels are losing their jobs. They tried dropping the entry requirements, you can get away with breaking some of the lesser commandments much more often these days but there's only so far they can take that without ruining the atmosphere completely.'

Morgan nodded, amused by the extent of the man's delusions, 'That's understandable.'

'There's even some repentant murderers in there these days although they tend to be watched very closely and 'encouraged' to head back to Earth for another go.'

'But even with the relaxed entrance exams there still aren't enough people.'

Eric nodded, 'It all boils down to the fact that, on average, people are rubbish. The majority of people commit too many minor crimes to be let back into Heaven.'

After the conversations he'd been having at work today, Morgan couldn't disagree. 'So why did you come back?'

Eric shrugged, 'It's complicated.'

'And how come you can remember all this if you've been reincarnated?'

'I wasn't reincarnated. I came back for different reasons.'

Morgan nodded and downed his drink, deciding at the same time it should be his last. 'Well, Eric it's been good talking to you but I'd better get off.'

Eric smiled, 'A lovely wife at home I expect.'

'Nope, single but happy.'

Eric looked at Morgan's suit. 'Businessman?'

'Solicitor.'

'Ah, so you get to see what I'm talking about?'

'Sometimes. Look, I'm sorry but I've got to get off. Do you want another drink before I go?'

Eric shook his head, 'No. Thank you. You could do me a small favour though.'

'Sure.'

'Would you walk me to my flat? It's just round the corner. Might even be on your way. I'm always a little nervous after dark.'

Morgan resisted the temptation to check his watch. He didn't have anything to rush back to. 'Okay, no problem.'

Eric's face lit up, 'Thank you so much. You're a real gentleman, a dying breed you might say. They could do with more people like you in heaven.'

Morgan smiled, knowing Eric would think otherwise if he knew him a little better. 'No problem.'

The two men waved goodbye to the barman as they walked out. It was the last time he saw either of them.

Eric's flat was indeed just round the corner.

'It's just up here, on the third floor. Thanks for doing this. I'm always a little nervous. This area was a lot nicer when I was a young boy.'

Morgan shook his head as he stepped over a bundle of rags huddled in the corner of the stairs, 'I'm sure it was.'

'I expect the politicians have got a name for it. Inner city decay or something.'

'Probably.'

'Whatever it is, I wish they'd do something about it. Someone pushed some used toilet paper through my letterbox yesterday.'

Morgan cringed, 'Jesus.'

Eric glanced at him.

'Sorry. I guess that rules me out of heaven.'

Eric smiled and shook his head, 'Not any more.'

'Phew, that's a relief.'

'Of course, solicitors are ruled out of a matter of course.'

Morgan laughed, 'Ah well, perhaps I'll change career.'

'Probably a good idea. Anyway we're here. My little home.'

Eric swung open the door to his flat, flicked on the lights and turned back to his escort. 'Thanks again Morgan; you're a true gentleman.'

'No problem. No problem at all. You take care, Eric.'

Morgan turned away and headed back to the stairs, debating whether to stop by Solo and see if there was anyone he might like to spend the evening with.

'Morgan! Just a moment. I've got something for you. Just a small thank you for indulging an old man.'

Morgan held up his hands, 'There's no need. Just look after yourself – that's enough for me.'

'Just a moment, honestly it won't take a second.'

Morgan considered making a run for it but decided better of it. 'Okay then, but you really don't have to.'

'I know, I know. Just come in for a moment and I'll find it for you.'

Morgan walked back to the flat and headed inside. If he'd been asked to describe an old man's flat he'd have come up with something very similar to Eric's. Wall to wall threadbare carpets, wallpaper that had been passé in the seventies, a geriatric television skulking in the corner and a layer of dust you could swim in.

Eric was rummaging around in a room at the back of the flat, 'I won't be a minute, it's in here somewhere. Sit down if you'd like.'

Morgan looked at the heavily stained sofa and decided to stand.

The rummaging went on for several minutes and Morgan was looking at a grimy painting of an angel when Eric came back into the room.

'Is it you?', Morgan asked, without turning around.

Eric reached in front of the solicitor and sliced a knife across the man's throat in one practised arc. He stepped aside as Morgan staggered backwards, clutching the slash in his throat, a surprised gurgling the only sound he could manage.

'No, it isn't.'

Morgan's leg caught the edge of the sofa, the rest of his body needed no further encouragement and collapsed onto the cushions.

'Don't struggle. You're a good man. A true gentleman. You'll like Heaven.'

Morgan's eyes flared as blood gushed around his fingers and realisation seeped into his rapidly dulling mind.

Eric grinned as he closed the knife. 'That's right. We're on a recruitment drive.'

The Absolutely Shocking Story of Belinda

Tina Rath

Belinda loved the gothic scene, she couldn't get enough
Of weathered stones, and human bones – and all that kind of stuff.
She changed her name to Cankered Rose, she dyed her hair maroon
And went to live in Whitby with her little pet baboon.

One midnight she went walking up the Abbey steps alone
(The baboon was rather chesty and he had to stay at home)
And Belinda, gazing seawards, saw, with more surprise than fear,
A great storm-beaten sailing ship go smash into West Pier.
So down the steps she hurried, and across the empty street.

The people in the houses heard the patter of her feet.
They heard her run across the pier, they heard her give a cry
And never since has she been seen by any human eye.
For when they dared to go and look, the ship had vanished quite,
And there was nothing to be seen but storm and waves and night.

Now every evening when the dusk displaces afternoon
Upon the pier, in hope and fear, there waits a small baboon.
He doesn't think they'll bring her back, but just in case they should

He's got a store of garlic and some
pointy bits of wood.

The moral of this story is writ in
ancient runes:

Steer very clear of vampire ships, and
never trust baboons.

In the Name Of ...

Mel Cartagena

Love has had varied physical incarnations through the ages. The cherubic Cupid, in spite of his godhood, is rendered helpless by his diminutive body, which denies the possibility that he could physically love the goddess Psyche, an adult female of average proportions. Aphrodite, the Greek love goddess, and her Roman counterpart Venus, while figuring prominently in mythology, use their power in opposing ends of the love spectrum. While Venus removed Aeneas' spear from the olive tree and returned it to the warring Roman, Aphrodite promised Paris the hand of a married woman in exchange for the undisputed accolade of the most beautiful of goddesses, igniting the Trojan war.

So in a time of cynicism, in a faithless age, Love is born anew.

Love is a man that stands five-foot-ten-inches tall, has light brown hair worn in a crew-cut, has green eyes, and is missing the top knuckle in the pinky finger of his left hand.

Love walked out of the Lawrence Public Library, and stopped in front of the squat, glass-tinted building. He meant to go south along Park street, until a disruption in the static air, a shifting of the atmosphere beckoned him. He stood motionless on the wide sidewalk while high school kids and parents went around him, then started across the street towards the school.

He had never been inside Lawrence High School, but his steps carried him confidently through an empty hallway, past a room with two security officers, and up a spiral staircase with ornate iron railings to an open, tar-covered door that led to the roof.

Love's chipped workboots crunched on the crushed gravel as he went to the east elevation of the building. The teenager leaning against the ledge did not hear his steps. The wind blew in the opposite direction, taking the sound of Love's boots that way. Love stopped ten feet from the teenager's back.

'Hey!' he exclaimed softly so as not to startle the youth.

He did anyway, and the teenager swivelled to face Love, grabbing the ledge with shaking fingers. 'Don't come near me! I'll do it. I'll jump!' the teenager threatened.

Love did not answer immediately; he stared openly at the teenager's raw, red gash on the left side of his face, the skin above and below sinking into a wrinkled, twisted trench that reached the back of his head.

Love's open appraisal of his face upset the boy. He put his head down and mumbled, 'What do you want?'

'How did you get up here?' Love asked him. 'Isn't the door kept locked after those two girls jumped together seven months ago?'

The teenager regarded him suspiciously, then answered cautiously, 'The

janitor. He – he thinks I’m his friend. He uses me, because I don’t have any friends. Thinks I look up to him.’ He chuckled softly, then became serious again. ‘He told me how he needs help, but the school won’t hire an assistant for him. So I offered to help.’

‘That’s pretty clever,’ Love said.

‘What?’ The teenager asked defensively.

‘Tricking the janitor to let him trust you with the keys to the door.’

‘I didn’t tell you that!’

‘No, but I know just the same,’ Love answered. He had moved two steps closer to the teenager. ‘Just like I know you’re suffering, Eddie.’

‘How d’you know my name?’ the teenager asked him, the wariness returning to his sad brown eyes.’

‘I know *you*, Eddie. I know what it’s like for you. I know of anyone who needs me, Eddie.’ Love moved closer as he spoke. He was only six feet from Eddie, who turned his face away, showing him the end of his scar and the fuzz of dark hair growing around it. ‘I didn’t want to touch it,’ he told Love with a breaking voice. ‘I knew it was a bad dog. I could *feel* it. But dad told me not to be a sissy, and – and I wanted to make him happy. I tried to push him off when he bit me first, but I couldn’t – I couldn’t...’ he sobbed softly and slid against the inside of the ledge until he was sitting on the gravel covering the roof.

‘And it’s never been the same for you,’ Love said gently, setting down the three hardcover books he took from the library and kneeling next to Eddie.

‘They won’t let me try for track or nothing,’ Eddie told him, openly weeping. ‘And I can run. I’ve timed myself, after practice, when there’s no one in the track. I’m as good as any of them.’ A sobbing fit wracked his slim frame. Love just held him.

‘I know, I know,’ he told Eddie. ‘I know of what the boys in the baseball team did, and of the prostitute also, and I don’t care. I’m not here to judge, I’m here to help.’

‘I had to pay her more,’ Eddie said in between sobs. He placed his face against Love’s shoulder, wetting the green sweater with his tears. Love hugged him back fiercely. ‘I had to give her more money, and she wouldn’t look me in the eye.’

‘I know, I know,’ Love said, taking Eddie’s head in his hands.

‘And I didn’t even want to do it,’ Eddie said as he cried. ‘She smelled like brandy and cigarettes. But I wanted to know what it felt like, ‘cause all the guys talked about it.’ His crying was angry, passionate, a cathartic expiation of self-hatred.

‘I know Eddie, I know,’ Love cooed. ‘I’ll help you.’

Love secured his grip on either side of Eddie’s head, then twisted brutally in both directions. Eddie’s grip tightened on Love’s upper arms for a second, then he slumped away. Love set Eddie down on the gravel delicately, then picked up his books and left. The trance-like state that guided his steps was gone. He was simply a man on his way home.

Love had hands that were small, but rough, calloused from fourteen years as a construction foreman. He was gruff, but fair in the treatment of his labourers, and prided himself in not once in his fourteen years having to fire an employee.

Two years ago, while changing a belt in an industrial strength generator reserved for night work, he caught his little finger in between gears while trying to clear a pulley free of coarse particles. He lost the tip of his finger on his left hand. It was while recovering in the hospital that the first manifestation of Love took place.

He was lying in bed, pleasantly dozing under the influence of the morphine, his workers having departed an hour earlier when visiting hours ended, when he felt the shift. The minute change in the air around him that signalled a call for help of the unusual kind. He sat up in his bed smoothly, and removed the IV unit from his arm. He dressed in fresh clothes brought to him by one of his visitors, then went to the elevator. He rode the car five floors up, and got out at the Intensive Care Unit. He did not question his presence there, simply let himself be guided seven rooms to his right, to the chamber with the little girl in the bed. She was a small child, made smaller still by the cancer eating at her lymph nodes and spreading through her body.

He approached the bed, a small part of him wondering why he was there, how the morphine-induced stupor had vanished so quickly. The girl in the bed breathed shallowly, laboriously.

'Hello,' Love said, very softly. The girl's eyes opened, light-blue and glazed. She made as if to answer, but the oxygen tube in her mouth garbled her words. Love reached over and removed the adhesive strips holding it in place and extracted the tube from her mouth.

'What was that?' he asked her after her mouth was free of restrictions.

'I said hi,' she responded weakly. 'You're not supposed to take that off,' she added, and licked her lips dryly. 'It helps me to breathe,' she admonished him. 'But thanks anyway.'

'You're welcome, Tammy,' Love said.

'How do you know my name?' the girl asked him. She sighed deeply and closed her eyes.

'I just know,' he told her, and it was the truth. The ripple in the air that brought him to her conveyed the information that he was now sharing with her. One instant he did not know of her, the next one he did. 'Where's your mom?'

'She went to get me a soda,' Tammy told him. 'Are you a friend of my mom?'

'No, I'm your friend. How do you feel about all this, Tammy?' Love asked and gestured at the machinery at the opposite side of the bed.

The girl made a small movement with her bony shoulders, barely perceptible under the hospital sheet. 'Tired,' she answered.

'What does your mom say?'

She sighed again. 'Nothing. She just stares at the wall and cries when she thinks I'm sleeping and says I'm going to be okay when I'm awake.'

'And what do the doctors say?'

'They just act nice and keep telling me I'm looking better all the time.'

'And what do you think?' Love leaned close to her. Her voice was growing fainter with each answer.

She thought for a few seconds before replying. 'They're lying,' she said, her voice sounding firmer this time. 'I used to draw. In my class – me and three other girls. We got picked and put in a special class. We were doing a mural at our school, and we were going to have some paintings put on show in the library, but then I started feeling tired all the time...' She trailed off in her narrative and sighed again. 'I want to draw again.'

'Why don't you?'

'I can't feel my hands,' she said, her tiny voice breaking. 'I know they're there, I just can't feel them.'

'Who are you?' A female voice demanded from behind Love and Tammy. He turned and saw a woman with dirty blond hair, generous of figure. A woman that would be considered attractive under better circumstances. She was holding a can of Welch's grape soda in her right hand and regarded Love with open suspicion.

'What are you doing in my daughter's room?'

'I am a friend, ma'am,' he told her in a placating tone, sensing that she, more than her child, was the cause for the shifting of the atmosphere. She was the one in need of help. 'I'm here because you need help.'

'I need for you to get the hell out of here before I call hospital security,' she said, moving to her daughter's bed while Love backed away from her.

'I assure you ma'am, I mean no harm to you or your girl. But you need to listen to your child; she has something to tell you.'

'Mister, I'm not going to tell you again,' the woman said, reaching for the intercom speaker. 'Get the hell out of—',

'Mom,' Tammy called to her, her voice soft but amazingly firm.

Her mother stopped shouting and bent near her daughter's face. 'Yes baby?'

'It's okay,' Tammy told her. 'He was leaving, mom.'

'Honey, you're not supposed to be without your breathing aid,' she told Tammy, reaching for the tube. The girl shook her head. 'I don't want it anymore, mom,' she said.

'Ma'am, listen to your daughter, not the doctors. She has something important to tell you,' Love said, then walked out of the room as silently as he had entered.

And the child and her mother talked, and the mother cried during the most adult conversation she ever had with her twelve-year old daughter, but she understood her pain, and the futility of keeping her attached to machines that would not bring back the child she once knew. She unhooked the life support and monitoring systems from her daughter, and attached them to herself, and held her daughter's hand until she stopped breathing, then reattached the instruments onto the dead girl.

And when the doctor on call rushed into find a machine reading a flatline and a crying woman, her never suspected her tears were of relief for her and the child that had been her daughter.

Love was born Benjamin Duanza Gostello thirty-eight years ago to Cecilio Duanza and Anette Costello. He kept that name until one month after visiting the little girl. It was the episode that convinced him unconditionally that he was Love.

He was walking home after stopping by the deli three blocks from his house. He had a roast beef sandwich in one hand and a root beer in the other, when his jacket made light contact with the robe of Father Carmine. He still thought of himself as Benjamin as he reeled from the invisible sparks resulting from the contact between the two fabrics.

Father Carmine looked at him curiously. 'Are you all right, sir?' he asked Benjamin, hands deep in the pockets of his robe.

Benjamin shook his head briefly, supporting himself against a parked car. He nodded at the priest, who immediately turned and went on his way. Benjamin stared at the tall, gaunt figure as it walked another block and went up the steps of St. Simon church. Benjamin stood on the sidewalk in the chill of early spring, replaying what invaded his mind during his brief contact with the preacher's black cloth. Garish pictures of naked children entrusted to the holy man by busy, trusting mothers. Boys defiled in the church basement by a crippled soul that loathed itself but could not control its twisted longing. Benjamin had a last image, one that depicted clearly the priest fondling himself under the robe, and the images of children stimulating the process, and immediately lost his appetite.

He felt the shift in the atmosphere again, the silent scream for help, and the inner being that took control of his steps. He went home, and after taking a bottle of pills from his medicine cabinet, walked back to St. Simon, where he found Father Carmine on his knees, his brow furrowed with devotion and guilt.

'It's no use father,' Benjamin said, drawing the holy man out of his self-induced reverie, 'He is not listening, but I am.'

'Confession hours are during the day, sir,' Father Carmine replied, trying not to act startled, ignoring everything Benjamin told him.

'I'm trying to help you, father. He won't come, won't answer you. I am here – and I know. Let me help you,' Benjamin pleaded.

'Sir, I have no idea what you're talking about, but if you don't make sense soon I'll have to ask you to leave before I call the police.'

'Father, how long do you think you can go on doing this before one of those children breaks?'

Carmine became red-faced; his long body shook with repressed rage, and he seemed on the verge of attacking Benjamin. 'Sir, for the last time, leave this house of god before I call the police.'

'Father,' Benjamin began patiently, 'I saw everything. I know that Cody is reaching his limit. He's doing badly in school, and doesn't play little league anymore. His parents are questioning him right now as we speak, Do you really

want to plead denial when they come for you?"

"How...?" Carmine formed a question that did not reach his grim lips. "How do you...?"

"You showed me, Father," Benjamin explained. "I saw it in you – it's in your head."

Carmine's body quivered for a long time before he collapsed on a nearby pew, assuming the position he was in when Benjamin arrived. "Dear Lord, I can't help myself!" he confessed to the empty church.

"I know," Benjamin assured him. "I'm here to help." He walked to where Carmine was kneeling and sat on the bench behind the pew, waiting for Carmine to recover.

"But who—" Carmine said, then amended "What in God's name *are* you?"

He hesitated for a brief moment. "I am Love," he answered, then reached in the inner pocket of his jacket, took out the pills, and placed them on the varnished headboard of the pew. "I used these when I was recovering from my accident," Love told the holy man, absently flexing the fingers of his left hand. "I won't need them anymore. They're yours if you wish to use them." Then Love got up from the bench and left the church and the priest to his personal demons.

Later that night, under the gentle coaxing from his parents, eight-year old Cody Samas admitted to being touched by Father Carmine after Sunday school and during biblical group outings. Two days later, when his parents formally pressed charges against the holy man, four other parents had come forward, increasing the list of molestation charges against the influential and respected priest. Four days later, when police officers came to arrest Carmine, they found him sitting in his private study, three days dead, with an empty bottle of Vicodin by his desk.

And Love embarked on a mile of compassion, never questioning his sudden decision to resign his job of fourteen years, never wondering why he felt no hunger anymore, never bothering to remember when was the last time he sat down for a meal. He felt nourished every time he assisted those who could not reach decisions unaided, could not put an end to their pain unassisted. He went on his winding mile, never caring for the trail he created and which the police were following. He never saw the need to cover his steps or destroy evidence. He was not committing a crime. He was answering a call for help. He was Love unconditional.

The end of Love's twisted mile brought him to the desk of Amanda Soren, independent investor. Love found her contemplating her position between an affair with a married man and an emotionally abusive boyfriend, plus the odd angle of having caused a break up between a former girlfriend and her man. The compulsive need to own what she couldn't have – only to find she didn't want it after all – coupled with an alcohol haze, rendered her helpless to take some form of direct action.

It was at this juncture that Love, the police and Amanda Soren collided. Four officers responding to an APB describing Love were in the same commercial building Amanda worked out of. On a hunch they followed the suspect and waited, until Amanda's screams for help roused them into action.

'Freeze!' Officer Tunney warned, drawing his service revolver at Love, the other three officers doing likewise. Love was at the other side of the desk, attempting to strangle Amanda Soren.

He tried to reason with the police officers. 'I'm only trying to help, officer. Believe me, this is what she wants.'

'Back away from her, Mr Costello! We have evidence that you assisted in the suicide of Father Carmine and the death of Eddie Trammel.'

'You don't understand officer,' Love said patiently, his hands loosely wrapped around her neck, tightly enough that she couldn't get away. 'This way it'll look like her boyfriend did it. She'll be out of the picture. No one else has to suffer,' He gave them a pleading look. 'Don't you see? It'll all work out in the end.'

Officer Tunney drew back the hammer of the revolver, the clicking sound incredibly loud in the acoustically-proofed office. He reflected that it was the first time in seven years of service that he'd drawn on a suspect. 'For the last time, Mr Costello, let the woman go and back away. Save us all some trouble.'

While Tunney attempted to defuse the situation, Amanda contemplated what Love said, and although such thoughts had been on her mind, the actual reality of the situation made her reconsider, allowing time for her cowardly nature to reassert itself. Taking advantage of the momentary distraction caused by the sound of the revolver being cocked, she turned her body towards Love, and shoved her knee at his groin. When he let her go, she pushed herself away with her mid-heel pumps, rolling away on her chair. Love recovered and went after her, ignoring officer Tunney's last warning.

'Freeze, Mr Costello! Freeze, I said!'

Love never listensd, and was shot ten times between all officers.

Officer Tunney went to Amanda, asking her if she was all right, while the others administered first aid and called for an ambulance. 'You'll be okay, Ms Soren,' he reassured her, sharply aware of her feminine attributes as he rubbed her back. 'You're safe now, Ms Soren. He can't hurt you any more. You're safe. You're safe.'

The monotonous consolation continued while she sat on the floor and observed the spreading pool of blood under Love's body, deeply staining the peach carpet covering the floor.

Love was declared Dead On Arrival of massive internal injuries and loss of blood, while Amanda found herself riding a wave of attention that prompted certain reporters to investigate her life more closely, bringing to light the love triangle of which she was the base. Because Love was not allowed to run its course, and because Amanda could not face her boyfriend one more day, the man she was forcing to commit adultery, nor the attacks of the press, she drove her

Lexus off a deep ravine in a drunken stupor.

Because the married man truly loved her, in spite of Amanda's flat refusal to let him proceed with a divorce, he shot himself in his studio, leaving behind several million in assorted stocks and bonds to fend for itself.

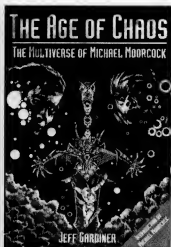
Because Amanda's boyfriend had been siphoning small amounts of money from her clients, and because there was no one left to manage the dwindling fortune of the married man, major shifts were felt in the stock market, hundreds of businesses across the country were forced to file for chapter 11 bankruptcy, and millions of small investors saw their portfolios shrink to nothing in a matter of days. The larger repercussions were explained by financial analysts as an unusual economical vacuum in a small but essential sector of the general wealth.

It was never considered that the true cause was a lack of Love.

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Mist

Angela Rigby

It was daffodil time and the bright yellow heads leaned forward from the earth beneath branchy trees. Debbie swung on the front gate, her small feet wedged on the lower cross bar and her head just reaching over the top. She banged the gate backwards and forwards against its post and sang:

'I'm four – I'm a whole four,' – the latter point being important since she had been offended by Auntie May saying she was four and a half. She wasn't a half.

She was waiting for Daddy. His tall figure dressed in army uniform would soon appear at the end of the road and come marching towards her waving, and she would wave back. She wasn't allowed to open the gate to run out to meet him but had to wait until he reached her when he would swing her up in the air and she would squeeze her arms tightly round his neck, rubbing her cheek against the rough material of his greatcoat – which she knew was called khaki because everyone said so, but which she called green. They would then go the few yards up the front path to where Mummy stood at the front door and she too would join in the hug.

It was a long wait and bedtime came with no sign of Daddy. Mummy picked her up and carried her in.

'I want to wait up for Daddy.'

'You can stay up a little while longer. I expect he missed his bus and will come on the next one.'

In her nightie and woolly dressing gown with the D on its pocket, Debbie stood on the staircase landing and looked out of the window to see him coming, but it got dark and finally Mummy carried her up to bed. She had clung on to the windowsill.

'I want to see Daddy.'

'If you're awake when he comes I'll come and get you.'

Debbie looked over Mummy's shoulder at the image of herself in the hall mirror – a little girl with fair plaits tied with pink ribbons. She was tucked into bed.

'Now Daddy will want to see a happy smiling girl. He'll soon be home.'

She went to sleep.

There was no Daddy in the morning and Mummy was on the phone. Auntie May came round. Debbie wanted to swing on the gate again but they kept her indoors. It was afternoon when two men came in army uniforms, and she could hear Mummy crying in the sitting room.

'Where's Daddy?' she asked Auntie May.

They were sitting at the kitchen table and Debbie could see that auntie had been crying as well.

'Daddy's not coming home. He's gone to live with Jesus,'

'Why? He lives with us,'

'Sometimes people have to go and live with Jesus. They're happy with him and they still go on caring about us.'

Corporal Jason Hall stood alone on the open moorland watching the new recruits in the distance. It was an ordinary uncomplicated exercise and he checked his watch to see how much longer it might be before they could all return to barracks. Then it would be his weekend leave to see Kate and Debbie. The men were getting more distant and he strained his eyes after them. No one apparently was coming in his direction, and he noted a slight mist was rising. He stepped forward to start to close the gap. It was an uneven piece of ground and he fell awkwardly doubling his foot under him.

When he came round the mist was intense. There was a pain in one foot and a worse one in his head. He tried to lift himself on his elbows and fell back again. It was getting dark and very cold. Pain and shock brought on bouts of shivering. He became delirious – he was in the kitchen with Debbie on his knee and Kate was making him a hot cup of tea.

'Kate,' he called. 'Kate.' He was drifting off when she came – bending over him so that he could just make out her features.

Debbie was deeply angry with Daddy for going off and living with Jesus when he ought to have stayed with her and Mummy, and some of the anger remained even as she grew up and was told the whole story. When he was found, after search parties had spent the night in near impossible conditions, he had been dead for less than half an hour – finally succumbing to cold, exposure and the effects of shock. As a sixteen year old, Debbie read the newspaper cuttings that reported the findings of the inquest. It was felt that Corporal Hall had not made it absolutely clear where he would be and he seemed to have allowed too great a distance to build up between himself and his troops. In normal conditions it wouldn't have mattered and he could easily have re-joined them. His fall followed by the unexpected weather conditions had been pure bad luck. The post mortem revealed a broken ankle and a hair line fracture of the skull that would have caused severe concussion. It appeared that as he fell his head had struck against a small outcrop of rock. The fracture would have healed within a short space of time had he survived. The verdict was accidental death.

She lived with her mother and they had the companionship of her grandparents and Auntie May. The newspaper cuttings were packed away in a box in the attic and the photograph of a young soldier with his pretty bride became the main image of her father. She looked closely at it sometimes, trying to remember his features, but her own memories were fading. She would think of what it must have been like for him during that last night – of whether he had

thought of her as he lay there and had wanted her and her mother to be with him. She visited his grave with flowers but it wasn't enough. It wasn't a sufficient goodbye. She was in her twenties and had finished with university and her geography degree when she decided that she had to do what he must have wanted. She had to go out and look for him.

It was early in the morning when she set out from the hostel across the springy heather and green grass of the moors. It wasn't spring as it had been then. There were skylarks overhead and some partridges clattered up as she walked. She had an ordnance survey map and a rough idea of the area she was looking for. A small bunch of summer flowers was attached to her backpack and with it a note that read. *Dear Daddy. I'm sorry I wasn't here for you, but I came as soon as I could. Love you always, Debbie.* She would lay it down somewhere near where he must have been. There was no sign of any farms or houses now – just the horizon around her with a breeze rattling against the papery heather. She stood still and an immense sense of loss and grief hit her as it never had before.

'Daddy,' she called. 'Daddy, I'm here.'

There was no sound except for the skylarks overhead. A cloud was coming down over the moor. She shaded her eyes and looked towards it, and decided she would have to move. Visibility decreased fast as she walked and she took out her compass for direction. It was getting cold.

There was a voice somewhere. She stopped and listened. 'Hello?' She moved slowly and carefully. There had been a few distant figures when she started out but the mist was so dense now that it would be impossible to detect the direction of the sound. She went on and reached a slight depression in the ground. A young man lay there – presumably just out of sight from anyone walking on level ground. He was in army uniform and looked very pale. He was barely conscious.

'It's all right,' she said. She swung her backpack down, remembering all the things her father must have needed and which could have saved his life. She found a folded groundsheet attached to the knapsack that was still strapped to him. She rolled him on to his side carefully, undid the buckles and then wrapped the groundsheet over him. She unfolded her space blanket and wrapped it round herself and then broke up bits of mint cake – of which the packet assured her it had been eaten at the top of Mount Everest, and coaxed tiny fragments into his mouth. She managed to lift his shoulders and tipped a little hot tea from her flask into his mouth. He moaned. Then she lay down with her arms round him. It was essential she knew not to leave him.

'We'll keep warm together,' she said. 'Until the mist clears. It shouldn't be long. I told them at the hostel where I was going. If it gets late, they'll start looking.'

It grew cold and dark and she crumbled more mint cake into his mouth and ate some herself. She made the tea last throughout the night in small sips. It

was getting light when she heard voices at some distance.

'We're here,' she called. 'We're here...' Visibility was still only a few yards. She got up. It was a risk but she had to meet them. She hugged the space blanket around herself and stepped out into the mist.

Debbie swung on the front gate watching as the car that was bringing Daddy home drew up. Auntie May meanly caught her hand to stop her rushing out to him. She had to be patient as Mummy helped him out onto the pavement. He stood up on his crutches – one big plastered foot lifted off the ground.

'I can't pick you up, Deb,' he said. 'I haven't a spare arm.'

They all sat at the kitchen table and Daddy had a hot cup of tea while she snuggled up to him.

'I thought I was finished,' he said. 'All I could think of, Kate, was you and Debbie. Somehow I must have got the ground sheet out and I'd eaten some mint cake. And then I thought you came and lay down beside me and we kept warm together.'

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My Garden

David J Howe

There is something at the bottom of my garden. Now I know all the stories and I know all the myths. They're meant to be fairies, but if they are, they're not out of any children's bedtime story.

So what happened, you ask. Why am I talking about fairies? Well it's partly to explain. That's if anyone actually believes me. If anyone cares enough to listen.

And why should they. I still consider myself a reasonably attractive woman of twenty-five years. I can just see the thoughts rushing across your face as you look at me. You don't know whether I'm a raving nutter, or a publicity-seeker, or something else entirely.

Let me try and explain. Amazing as it may sound, it started only yesterday.

It was Saturday, if today is Sunday, and I think it is, so it must have been Saturday. I was out in my garden as usual for the weekend, checking the garden pond, seeing if the frogs and toads were still thrashing about in the water, doing what frogs and toads do in the spring. My fish idly swam about, pretending to ignore the frogs, and the black water-boatmen skittered across the surface looking for food. I picked a few good daffodils which had bowed their heads to the grass overnight, intending to put them in a vase once indoors. My meandering in the garden took me to the bottom, where a large and ancient oak tree stands twisted and knurled. When I was a kid, I used to play in its branches, and my dad once built a swing up on one of the higher boughs. I can still remember him pushing me higher and higher as the sunshine dappled my face and dress with patterns of light filtered through the leaves.

At the base of the tree is a bole, a knotty, lumpy area which makes the old tree look as though it is wearing a legwarmer, or so I always thought. Around the tree no grass would ever grow. We tried one year to plant some. Raking the earth to smooth and break it up, scattering grass seeds, and then watering the area every day. Nothing. Perhaps I should have thought that this was strange, but I didn't. I didn't even think it was odd that the grass stopped in a neat circle around the tree, about three feet from the trunk. I suspect that I thought it was just some nature thing – maybe the tree roots sucked all the moisture from around the tree making it impossible for other plants to grow there.

This morning, however, I noticed that the bole had a split in it.

As I love that tree, I stooped to look closer. There was a break in the bark about an inch across at its widest. It was seeping some whitish liquid and within the split I could see something glinting. I crouched down and looked closer.

To my amazement, there then clambered from the hole a tiny person.

No. Honestly. Swear on my life. It was a small person with wings.

They made their way out of the slit in the bole, and sat preening their delicate wings, which twinkled and sparkled in the shifting patterns of sunlight. I crouched there silently, not quite believing what I was seeing. I blinked, I remember, several times, but every time I opened my eyes, this little green-tinted person was still there, gently rubbing its wings with his hands, rather like a cat cleaning its fur.

Then another head emerged from the bole, and a second little figure joined the first. This one was a reddish hue, and it too sat and started unfurling gossamer wings from its back.

They wore no clothes these creatures, and their tiny bodies were shifting and changing hue as the sun hit them. A little like a cuttlefish can change its colours as it swims along. Lightening swift, pulsing and shifting the whole time.

As I watched, the first creature finished tending to its wings and looked up suddenly, as if seeing me watching for the first time. With a flicker, it was airborne, and, like a humming bird or a hover fly, was hanging in front of my face.

I think I must have smiled with delight as it flitted to and fro, glinting wings a blur on its back, while its body flushed purple and green.

It hovered closer to the ground, and by instinct I raised my left hand – the one which was not clutching a posy of daffodils. Holding my hand out flat, the fairy hovered closer, peering at my large and ungainly fingers. Then, it settled gently on my palm, its feet barely felt.

I could not believe this. There was I, sitting on my haunches in a sunny garden, under an aged tree, with a real live fairy standing on the palm of my hand.

Just then the second creature appeared in the air by my head. It too flitted down to my hand and joined the other standing there. I just watched them in a daze.

The first creature held out its hand to the second and they clasped their own tiny fingers together.

Then, in unison, they bent down and bit me.

I think I screamed and frantically shook my hand in the air to try and dislodge them. They had both sunk their tiny needle-sharp teeth into the fleshy area at the base of my thumb, and were hanging on for dear life. I shook my hand even harder and watched with satisfaction as one of the creatures lost its grip and flew off to hit the tree-trunk with an audible slap. The other let go on its own and hovered momentarily, looking at me with its head cocked to one side, before flying to its partner which was caught in the bark on the tree.

I stood up and examined my hand, which was now throbbing painfully. At the base of my thumb were two sets of circular marks. Both in perfect rings about

half a centimetre across, and both consisting of seven red pinprick points.

Looking back to the tree, where my two attackers were now nowhere to be seen, I hurried back up the garden to the kitchen, where I doused a cotton wool pad with TCP and pressed it against the painful punctures. Further investigation showed that gently squeezing the bitten area produced a milky white fluid from the pin pricks and shooting pains up my arm which made my head spin alarmingly.

I headed for the telephone, intending at that point to phone my doctor to explain that I had been bitten ... but then hesitated. How could I possibly tell him what had caused the marks. Fairies? He'd never believe that for one moment.

I looked again at my left hand which was now cradled in my right. The marks had become puffy and raised from the surface, and my whole arm was now starting to throb. I went to pick up the telephone, but found that my arm was now aching so much, and my head was starting to spin, that I couldn't concentrate on anything, let alone finding the number and dialling the doctor.

So I went back out into the garden.

My hand was not a pretty sight. I think it was after about ten minutes that the skin started to stretch and change colour. The reds and oranges were vibrant, but as I watched, I could see other colours blossoming and blooming under my skin: purple and vermilion and green. It stopped hurting after about twenty minutes, but then other things started to happen.

Take my stomach for example. I used to be a size eight, but my waist started to stretch to fill my jeans. And there was movement too. Ripples under the skin, small lumps sliding backwards and forwards. I tried pressing them, but they just slid out of the way.

I can see you're shaking your head. Perhaps you don't believe me. Perhaps you think you've come to the wrong house.

As I stood in my beautiful garden, with my once beautiful figure bulging, I found that I could see colours, light and movement that I had otherwise missed. Everything seemed so alive. Everything, that is, except me. When I looked down at my swollen and distended arm all I could now see was black, and as my jeans started to tear with the pressure, I could see my once-shapely legs – the ones I could halt a line of traffic with just by stopping in the street to adjust my skirt – swelling and bloating along with the rest of my body.

But it didn't hurt. I was just dizzy and giddy, and everything ached.

I remember blinking, and in the instant my eyes were closed, the light changed. It was moving like treacle, slowing down somehow. I could see shapes and colours in the grass, and with a jolt I realised that the two small fairy creatures were coming back. I tried to head back to the house, but found that my feet would not move. I was too tired, bloated, swollen and aching to be able to stagger anywhere.

The two creatures came closer, and they were moving a lot more slowly than they had been before. They were almost graceful and stately as they fluttered their bright wings and flew up towards my head. They landed on my shoulders, and I

found that I could not move my head to see where they had gone. Then, the aching subsided, and I felt two gentle pin-pricks on my neck, one on either side. I felt my eyes closing as a sense of great lethargy overtook me, and I slowly, oh so slowly, moved my arms up to try and brush the creatures away.

*

When I opened my eyes again, I saw you there. I know you think that there's something wrong as you looked concerned as you slowly stooped to pick up the remains of my jeans. Now you're looking at me. Studying me. But you haven't answered me yet, or made any comment regarding my story.

What is it? Why are you gently rubbing my arm with your hand. Does the roughness of my skin worry you?

You look worried. I can see you frown as you turn and slowly walk to the house. No. Don't go. It's me. Can't you hear me? Can't you see me?

Why won't my arms move? It's as though they're locked in place above my head. I can just glimpse them out of the corner of my eye. But they're brown. It's not skin at all. It's bark. Why are my arms covered with bark?

I close my eyes again, and feel a tear gently run down my trunk. I cannot move, but the sun is pleasant enough. The ground beneath me is grassy, but soon a bare ring of earth will start to surround me. The sun will dapple the ground around me as I stand here, the light filtering through my leaves.

I'm not hungry. Not thirsty. I don't ache any more. I can watch my beautiful garden grow up around me. I can watch the fairies as they flit about. See the frogs and toads in the pond.

My garden is my life, and I feel that soon I'll be bringing more life into my garden, as I can sense a hole starting to gather around my feet.

There is something at the bottom of my garden. Now I know all the stories and I know all the myths ... and I think that just maybe I now know where fairies come from.



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